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HILL

Mettray

1885

HUMPHRYS*

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Bill, Matthew Davenport

M E T T R A Y.

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A LETTER

FROM THE

RECORDER OF BIRMINGHAM

TO

CHARLES BOWYER ADDERLEY, ESQ., M.P.

From the "Law Review" for February, 1855.

LONDON:

CASH, BISHOPSGATE STREET.

1855.

Price Threepence.

FRA
985.8

HIL

LONDON :
A. and G. A. SPOTTISWOODE,
New-street-Square.

METTRAY.

The Exemplar of Reformatory Schools. Letter from M. D. HILL, Esq., Q.C., Recorder of Birmingham, to C. B. ADDERLEY, Esq., M.P.

“Heath House, Stapleton,
Bristol, 16th January, 1855.

“DEAR SIR,

“The position which you hold in Parliament, and in the country, as a leader in the Reformatory movement, has very naturally induced many correspondents to apply to you for information to guide them in the establishment of Reformatory Schools. The object of my present letter is to submit to your consideration more fully than I have hitherto done, the great advantage which would arise from every person who is called upon to act an important part in such an enterprise, repairing to Mettray, not merely for a visit of an hour or two, but with the intention of studying the subject of his inquiries fully and completely, and on the spot, at which he will find in successful action almost every expedient hitherto devised to secure genuine and permanent reformation.

“The *colonie*, as it is called, is placed in a rural district, about five miles from Tours, which city is connected with Paris by railway. Mettray then may be reached from the capital by a day's journey, and the traveller will find a convenient hotel close at hand.

“In the surviving founder, M. de Metz, he will discover a sufficient explanation of the high excellence which Mettray has attained. He can scarcely be long in the society of that extraordinary person without seeing that he is urged on by a philanthropy so intense as to have become a passion, which might be as injurious as it is beneficial, were it not under the dominion of the soundest judgment. Thus guided, it resembles the power of the copious river directed upon Arkwright's mill-wheel, the source and origin of every movement in the varied machinery required to accomplish the object for which the factory was constructed. But I must abandon this figure, which is but a lame one, and

does not illustrate the most striking effect of benevolence, in its application to the purposes of a Reformatory Institution, where it acts at once on the hearts of its objects with a sort of electric influence. They are subdued almost without a conflict, and the heart once softened and laid open to good impressions, the great work, though as yet merely commenced, is begun under the only conditions which can lead to a happy result. This philanthropy, which exhibits itself in every variety of ramification, and, what is better, makes itself felt through every hour of the day, must become the subject of careful reflection by the inquirer. Let him ask himself what are his own motives in his undertaking. Is he moved to exertion simply by the dictates of reason? Does he think only of protecting the upper classes from annoyance, and their pockets from taxation, by reforming young offenders? Or does his heart yearn towards the poor outcasts themselves—the little prodigals, who, though sufficiently disposed to ‘waste their substance with riotous living,’ if they had any substance to waste, are far better acquainted with the second vicissitude of the Parable—the feeding on ‘the husks which the swine did eat!’ Does he earnestly desire to snatch them from perdition, and to restore them to the fold?

“Doubtless all that he and others are doing may be defended on grounds of a wise and enlarged policy. But such considerations have not vitality enough to carry the Reformatory labourer through his toils. Unless the heart unite with the head in the task, no progress will be made. No handling of the rudder, however skilful, will set the ship in motion :

“‘Reason the card, but *passion* is the gale.’

Without an attachment to the pursuit which it is not extravagant to call passionate, the task will soon be abandoned in despair ; for difficulties and discouragements are as abundant as the advocates of the old system and the opponents of the new could desire. But minds of the right stamp are never discouraged by difficulties. Obstacles are stimulants. Such a spirit was the good Vicomte de Brétignères de Courteilles, the colleague of M. De Metz, and the donor of the land on which Mettray was founded. His remains lie in its burial-

ground, to which they have given a second consecration. His enduring ardour breathes through his epitaph, written by his own hand, and attested by every act of his life: — “J’ai voulu vivre, mourir et ressusciter avec eux.” Of this venerable man may we not say, as the Apostle wrote of Abel, — “He being dead yet speaketh,” for his words are not mere dumb and graven letters, but have a voice to make themselves heard and felt in the most callous heart? It is impossible to overrate the blessing of having had such men as De Courteilles and De Metz to precede us. They have raised our standard of possibilities, and their noble institution remains always ready to testify to the wondrous power of reformatory action, under able direction, when urged forward with the glowing zeal and the indomitable perseverance which they brought to the conflict.

“But this is digression. The inquirer will soon perceive that M. de Metz is not the man to rest satisfied with simply gaining the affections of his lads. Permanent reformation is not an affair of sentiment alone, even when that sentiment is founded on Christian impressions, but one of Christian sentiment enlightened by knowledge and confirmed by habit, and above all habits, by that of industry. Here, again, the inquirer will have much to observe — how many motives are brought into operation at Mettray to promote good habits of conduct! First, the selfish interests are appealed to as those which operate upon all, from the lowest in moral condition to the highest. Good conduct is of course rewarded and its opposite punished. There is nothing new in a resort to these principles; it is made everywhere: nevertheless much may be learned in studying their skilful application at Mettray. But Mettray would be very inferior to what it is were the selfish interests alone regarded. Let the inquirer mark the constant appeal to the highest feelings, temporal as well as eternal. I would speak here of the social interests and their cultivation. The five or six hundred youths at Mettray, while they form one community, are, as it is known, divided into many families, the members of each family having, to a great extent, common interests. For instance, every week an account is taken in order to ascer-

tain which family has best obeyed the laws and caught the spirit of the *colonie* — in short, which family has been the best citizens of the little commonwealth. And the most deserving family is honoured with some appropriate reward, say the possession of the colonial banner—a distinction highly prized, as might be expected, by the youth of a gallant and sensitive people. I must here pause for a moment to guard myself against being supposed to hold up every expedient at Mettray as fitted for importation into England. These expedients were devised by Frenchmen, and are adapted with exquisite skill to the peculiarities of the French character. We must look to the principle, and seek out English equivalents to bring it into action at home. Nothing is so sure of failure as mere servile copying. The musician Paganini was observed by his brother artists to draw wonderful tones from his violin by means of a bow, which having been fractured was repaired with a splicing of green silk thread; and his rivals were some of them accused of breaking their bows wilfully for the purpose of tying them up again after the exact fashion of Paganini (green silk and all), in the fallacious hope of obtaining a similar command over their instruments. By the arrangement of which I was speaking, strong social feelings are brought into play. Each lad is conscious that default on his part will not only bring ill consequences on himself, but on his family; while on their side his brethren have strong motives, by watchfulness, exhortation, and above all by example, to keep him in the right path. My time, and your patience, would both be exhausted long before I could enumerate a tithe of the admirable appliances of one kind or other which may be witnessed in operation at Mettray. The result is, that every variety of mind is wrought upon by every variety of good motive, none of them violent in their action, but none of them for a moment relaxing their influence. Thus the habits of an idle and vagabond life are gradually changed into those of settled industry, and an amount of labour (profitable labour be it remembered) is thus got out of the lads which would be yielded to no amount of severity,—labour, too, full of pleasant associations, and gradually producing habits which secure the crown-

ing result,—permanent reformation. Now this permanent reformation, as regards the proportion of youths attaining it, rises to a height far beyond what I myself, or, as I believe, any one of us ever dreamed of in our most sanguine moments. Ninety per cent. of the *colonie* become honest and useful members of society, and with regard to the ten per cent., their conduct is generally much better than could reasonably have been expected but for the effects produced upon them at Mettray.¹ And this brings me to the question, how are these facts ascertained? Because it was during the investigation to which this inquiry so naturally leads that my intense admiration of the *colonie* had its main growth. I was taken by one of the able and exemplary young men who form the staff of teachers at Mettray, into their *comptabilité*, and there I was permitted to examine a system of accounts perfectly marvellous, for the detailed information which they gave of everything done in the *colonie*. Each lad's history—I might almost say diary—was recorded and preserved. Each youth when he quits Mettray is put under the care of a patron—some benevolent person residing near the employer to whom the quondam *colonist* is consigned. This patron reports periodically on the character of his ward, and thus the institution exercises a superintendence over its former members, extending through many years, and registers their conduct. Such a provision for the discovery of failures struck me as implying, first, a thorough knowledge on the part of the conductors as to what is the true test of the genuine success of an institution of this nature; and, secondly, an earnest desire that their own institution should gain no reputation but what it righteously deserved. Let me avow that I recognise in this admirable provision a moral tone in the conduct of affairs, which some experience teaches me to believe is not of every-day occurrence.

“But I must bring these remarks to a close. I feel at this moment, somewhat painfully, how impossible it is to convey by words (impossible to me, at least), an adequate concep-

¹ By the report of the “Glasgow House of Refuge for Boys,” for the year 1854, just published, I learn that the results of that admirable institution are most gratifying; and yet it suffers for want of funds!

tion of the knowledge to be obtained by a visit to Mettray ; and, above all knowledge, those impressions upon the mind and the affections (which, whether the metaphysicians would call them knowledge or not) are invaluable to the possessor. But the more difficult the task of transferring these results from head to head by the tongue or the pen, so much the more important is it that the inquirer should see, hear, and feel for himself. Again, Mettray has now a history. It is fifteen years old,—an ample space of time to submit all results to the full test of experience. No similar institution in England now existing has gone through the same ordeal. Stretton-on-Dunsmore has closed its useful life, and has passed away, to my deep concern and mortification. The fall of any one reformatory establishment, for whatever reason, is a “heavy blow and a great discouragement” to us. Every fact which requires to be explained away, is a sad obstacle to the spread of new opinions. We have only to reflect for a moment upon the shock which every existing institution among us and every one struggling into birth, would receive by the closing of Mettray, were such an event possible, to feel how it behoves us to labour, in season and out of season, to guard against any one of our home experiments turning out unsuccessful. And unsuccessful some of them must be, unless the founders and conductors imbue themselves far more deeply than they have hitherto done with sound reformatory principles ; and unless, too, they obtain far greater familiarity than they at present possess, with the expedients which have been devised in various countries for accomplishing the great and most difficult object before them. No Mahomedan believes more devoutly in the efficacy of a pilgrimage to Mecca, than I do in one to Mettray.

“ Believe me, dear Sir,

“ Very truly yours,

“ M. D. HILL.

“ Charles Bowyer Adderley Esq., M. P.,
Hams Hall, Warwickshire.”

THE END.

LONDON :
A. and G. A. SPOTTISWOODE,
New-street-Square.



